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SACRED JOURNEY

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SACRED JOURNEY®

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is

to encourage and support

a spiritual orientation to life,

to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit of unity

among humankind.

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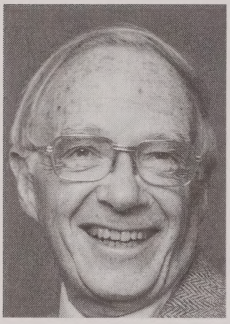
Cover photo by Abraham Menashe

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL



The Dark Night of the Soul is not always a dread-filled and depressing experience, as those of you know who heard Dr. Gerald (Jerry) May enthrall us with his keynote presentation at last June's "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference in Princeton.

When Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross used the term *oscura*, Dr. May explained, they did not mean anything negative or sinister. "The real meaning for them," he explained, "was that things were obscure; you can't see or grasp what's happening, as in the dark of night. So this kind of darkness was for them an experience of unknowing, of mystery. God darkens things in order to keep us safe—so we know that we don't know, and are more likely to leave things in God's hands."

"Whether tender or tragic," Dr. May continued, "the dark night of the soul always involves our being taken where we would not and could not go on our own. This is God's activity. Not ours."

Struggling to make things different or better is usually a mistake, for us and for our spiritual companion, or director, if we have one. We forget that it's God's work,

and that neither we nor our spiritual companion can ever know the secrets of what God is doing in our soul.

"In my experience," Jerry May added, "a person having an experience of the dark night of the soul is the last person to expect it's God's work. If the spiritual companion also does not entertain that possibility, the two wind up colluding in trying to replace what is being relinquished, to go back to what was and, in so doing, try to work against God's secret, obscure activity."

Those short excerpts are only a taste of the insights that opened up new understandings for us at Dr. May's hour and a half presentation in Princeton.

To own the tape of Jerry May's talk (as well as the tape of Joan Borysenko's fascinating presentation, "Fire in the Soul: Facing Crisis, Change and Challenge with Spiritual Optimism") fill in the form "Tapes and Totes," in the back of this issue and mail the form to us with your payment.

REBECCA LAIRD/EDITOR

WALK IN BEAUTY

Honestly, watching the sun slip from view in a western sky is the single spiritual practice that unfailingly fills me with serenity and offers me perspective.

Years back, in autumn, I noticed that when heading home at the end of the work day, the sun would be ablaze over my shoulder as I drove. For a couple of weeks I looked forward to traveling the short stretch of road where I watched a fire-orange sky dim to dusk. This predictable solar sentry reminded me that the world turns, the sun sets, the sun rises. Reality is reality even when what you or I may feel or face seems frightening, random, or simply pointless.

The days shortened, and I began to anticipate the pink and purple sky of early evening that often showed off in the patches of sky seen from my office window. Watching, slowing, lifting my gaze, waiting, these became the actions necessary to this soulful practice that rooted me in the earth's trustworthy rhythms.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro in this month's *Questions & Answers* says, "Spirituality is about what you do, not what you think or how you feel." Rabbi Shapiro also describes six contemplative practices that add up to "the Straight Path," a way of living so that we might awaken "to the presence of God in, with, and as all reality."

Peggy Frutiger Hanson writes of how her political activism

came home when she realized that parenting three boys into maturity brought her face to face with her own relationship with power. "Motherhood as Spiritual Action" reminds us all that our daily relationships have a political and social dimension.

In *Spiritual Community*, Rehel Bader describes a dream where both human participants and otherworldly ones were necessary to say prayers for the dead and complete a healing in the world.

"In the Attic" by Jeff McCord tells the story of one man's daily morning trek to sit among castaway furniture and unpacked boxes and there listen to God, who is "free to color outside the lines" of our spiritual expectations.

Kathryn Beres faces the moment that we all dread. How do we give the gift of a final good-bye to a parent or loved one whose body must die while acknowledging that their imprint on us will remain permanently? She tells her story in this month's *A Transforming Experience*.

A simple question, "What are you doing, Mary?" spoken at just the right moment, starts Mary Penrose on a journey from carefree teen to the religious life. Read the details in "Praying Readiness." A book review by Maryann Hannan points you toward more good stuff to read when you finish these pages. Spiritual reading, is, after all, a dependable spiritual practice many of us eagerly and regularly enjoy.

As the seasons shift in the coming days, try this traditional Navajo prayer—put it into practice. See how awake and aware you become!

> "In beauty may I walk. All day long may I walk. Through the returning seasons may I walk . . . With beauty may I walk. With beauty before me may I walk. With beauty behind me may I walk. With beauty above me may I walk. With beauty all around me may I walk. In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk. In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, living again, may I walk. It is finished in beauty."

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Tom Elliott

A Lifelong Love Affair with God

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

After twenty years in synagogue leadership, Rabbi Rami Shapiro realized, "I needed more silence in my life." He retired from the congregational world to focus on his own spiritual practice and writing. Simultaneously, changes were happening at Metivta, a national training center for Jewish contemplative practices based in Los Angeles. As Rabbi Shapiro recalls, "Word got out that I was free and in consultation with my rebbes (spiritual teachers) I decided this was good work and I should do it."

Metivta, which means "spiritual academy" in Aramaic, is dedicated to "learning through doing." In keeping with Metivta's mission, a daily meditation time is observed and once a week the small staff observes a morning of silence. Rabbi Shapiro says, "We are working. We aren't sitting in meditation, but we don't talk to each other. Very creative work gets done between 8A.M. and noon on Thursday mornings. When we come out of silence we also seem to be mindful of saying only what needs to be said to each other."

Minyan: Ten Principles for Living a Life of Integrity, *Rabbi Shapiro's most recent book, teaches how and why spiritual practices with "centuries of history behind them" help each of us live out our highest ideals in everyday life. For more information on Rabbi Shapiro and Metivta go to www.metivta.org.*

Sacred Journey: **You are clearly a man on a mission. How do you define your life's work?**

Rami Shapiro: I don't really think in terms of my life's work. My life is my work, though I worry sometimes that my work is my life. Having said that, however, I could add that my career goals have always been the same: from my youth I wanted to be a writer and a rabbi. When I was in seventh grade I knew I wanted to write. Later that translated into wanting to be a writer. I do write. Writing is part of my spiritual work. Writing, as Natalie Goldberg says, is my practice. And I have published a number of books. But I don't know if that makes me a writer. I was ordained as a rabbi in 1981 and founded and led my own synagogue until 2001. But I don't know if that makes me a rabbi. I am a writer when I am writing. I am a rabbi when I am teaching. When I am not doing anything I am, blessedly, nothing at all. If on the other hand you ask what I am trying to accomplish with all this effort, I would say without hesitation: I am carrying on a lifelong love affair with God.

You define God as "not something you pray to, but rather the greater reality to which you awake." What difference does this view make in how you live and pray?

I understand God as the Source and Substance of all reality. I get this understanding from both the books I read and the contemplative practices I do. It's both an intellectual construct and a felt reality. Our relationship to God is analogous to that of an ocean to its waves. No wave can exist outside the ocean. And while each wave is unique and distinct, all waves are simply the ocean extended in a specific time and place. You and I are waves of God's ocean. We do not exist outside of God. We are

simply *tzelem Elohim*, God manifest in time and place. What difference does this kind of thinking make? I am not sure it makes any difference. These are just thoughts. Reality is reality regardless of what I think or how I feel about it. Regardless of my understanding of God I still have to get up in the morning, shower, dress, eat, and go about my day. I still get sick, grow old, and die. I still feel anger, loss, frustration, pain, joy, gratitude, awe, and all the rest. So I don't know if these ideas make any difference. What makes a difference is what I do.

I will say this, however: when I feel happy or sad I am aware that these are not really my feelings. They are just feelings, and the label "my" really means very little. I know that while the things that make me happy may be very different from the things that make you happy, still the way you and I experience happiness is probably the same. When I say to you "I am happy" you know exactly what I mean because you experience happiness the same way I do. Fear for you is no different than fear for me. This is true of all feelings. Not taking ownership of my feelings allows me to feel them without having them control me.

This is not, however, how I used to live. I used to think that what I was feeling was me. I was sad, I was angry, I was horny, I was happy. This kept me on a rollercoaster of emotional upheaval. Now I have a sense of equanimity beneath all the feelings and thoughts that arise into my consciousness. Does this affect the way I pray? To be honest I don't pray. Not if "to pray" means to talk to Someone Over There. When I lead prayer services I do so as an affirmation of the community's highest values. In our formal prayers we articulate and remind ourselves of our highest values by projecting them on to God. God in prayer acts as a mirror reflecting back our values and

making it clear how far we have to go to truly embody them. I prefer meditation to prayer; silence to words. In the stillness and silence of meditation all my ideas drop away. I pick them up again when the meditation period is over, but I hold them more lightly then before I meditated. Meditation is like Teflon, it provides a no-stick surface so that my thoughts and feelings, assumptions and ideas take no permanent hold on "me".

Words and phrases like "emptiness," "the non-duality of God" and "the essence of reality" roll off your tongue. These ideas are more popularly associated with Buddhism than Judaism. How have Buddhist practices influenced your Jewish faith?

We tend to associate these terms with Buddhism, but they are not exclusive to Buddhism. My theology comes from my reading of Jewish sources, especially the *Tanya* written by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady over two centuries ago. While it is true that my experience with Zen Buddhism sensitizes me to these kinds of words, they are already a part of Jewish thinking. The difference is that for Buddhism this kind of talk is mainstream, while for Judaism it is mystical. Anyway, to answer your question: I would say that my Buddhist training allowed me to uncover the nondual aspects of Judaism that I would otherwise never have noticed.

"Spirituality", you've written, is "a conscious practice of living out the highest ethical ideals in the concreteness of everyday life." So how do we become conscious and know what ethical ideals should guide our actions?

By conscious practice I simply mean that we pay

attention to our thoughts, words, and deeds, and do our best to see that our behavior honors the other as well as the self, knowing that both are manifestations of God. Spirituality is about what you do, not what you think or how you feel. We don't become conscious. We live consciously. When we talk about becoming conscious we make things very mysterious. I don't think there is any mystery in spirituality at all. There is awareness and there is delusion. There is kindness and there is exploitation. Where is the mystery? As for the virtues the spiritual person cultivates, these are universal: justice, compassion, honesty, humility, and the like. We make spirituality mysterious and complicated so as to excuse ourselves from being kind, compassionate, honest, and just.

Life is really quite simple: you are born, you live, and you die. You act kindly or cruelly; you are generous or stingy; you are loving or fearful. No mystery here. You want mystery? Invent theology, past lives, heavens and hells. But this is only in your mind. There is no mystery, only reality. You either live with attention or not; there is no mystery.

You've recently taken a new position as the president of Metivta—a Jewish "spiritual academy"—dedicated to Jewish contemplative practice. What exactly are you up to?

Metivta is the only Jewish center devoted specifically, and in our case exclusively, to contemplative practice. At the heart of Jewish contemplative life are six practices I call *Derekh haYashar*, the Straight Path. These practices are authentically Jewish, but not unique to Judaism. Versions of them can be found in every major faith tradition. Their universality attests to their efficacy. The six contemplative practices are: *Hitbodedut, Teshuvah, Musar, Limud, Gerushin*, and *Hitbonenut*. Here is my definition of each:

Hitbodedut (solitude). Reb Nachman of Bratzlav teaches that we should go outdoors each day and walk "among the trees and grasses, among all growing things" and enter into conversation with God. Make time to wander in wonder at nature's beauty, and speak with God about your life and your struggles. If you have difficulty getting started, make your difficulty the topic of conversation. Don't worry about repeating yourself. You may have to repeat the same problem or story dozens of times before you are ready to hear what God is trying to say to you regarding it.

Musar (cultivating goodness and compassion). *Musar* translates the states of mystical awareness into traits of everyday behavior. *Musar* practice includes *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, mastering the *middot* (virtues) of holiness through mindful self-observation; *b'rachot*, deepening your sense of gratitude by reciting 100 blessings every day; *sh'mirat halashon*, guarding your tongue that you speak only to heal and not to harm;

Tikkun (healing). There are two kinds of *Tikkun: Tikkun Olam* and *Tikkun Nefesh*. The first heals the world around you, the second the world within you. Central to *Tikkun Olam* are *gemilut chasadim*, gifting others with loving thoughts, words, and deeds, and *tzedakah*, being generous with your time, energy, and finances. At the heart of *Tikkun Nefesh* is *teshuvah*, returning to a sense of peace and wholeness by admitting your mistakes and making amends; and by asking for forgiveness and granting it graciously.

Limud (studying sacred text). You are what you think, and *limud* helps you think about what you truly are: *tzelem Elohim*, the image and likeness of God. Read daily from Torah, Tehillim (Psalms), Siddur (prayer book) or other sacred texts. When a word or phrase speaks to you, write

it down and consider what this text is saying to you about your life and how best to live it. As the Talmudic sage Ben Bag Bag teaches: "Turn it and turn it for everything is in it," (Avot 5:22).

Gerushin (ceaseless prayer). Silently repeat a divine name or sacred phrase (for example: *HaRachaman*/the Compassionate One, or *Shivitti Adonai l'negdi tamid*/I place God before me always) over and over in your mind. *Gerushin* breaks the ego's mantra of "I-Me-Mine" and frees you to step outside of the box of self and selfishness. If you forget and the repetition stops, just start again.

Hitbonenut (meditation) is settling into an interior spiritual silence to realize the nonduality of God in, with, and as all things. *Hitbonenut* is most often done sitting in a chair or cross-legged on cushions on the floor. Use the *Sh'ma* as a centering device: breathe in *Sh'ma*; breathe out *Yisrael*, breathe in *Adonai*, breathe out *Eloheinu*, breathe in *Adonai*, breathe out *Echad*. Twenty to thirty minute sitting periods can be juxtaposed with ten minute periods of very slow walking, silently saying *Hinneni* (Here I am) with each step.

So what I am doing is promoting these practices in different venues. We teach rabbis, cantors, and laypeople how to practice the Straight Path. We train people who wish to help others do these six practices. And we train *morei derekh*, way pointers or spiritual guides, who wish to facilitate another's awakening to the presence of God in, with, and as all reality. Which brings us full circle. It is all about God.

Motherhood as Spiritual and Political Action

Peggy Frutiger Hanson

After college I worked as a social worker for programs serving women in various stages of transition and healing from personal, often intimate, violence. Most survivors had one thing in common: They were hurt by someone, often a male, who had used power to get his own way. I believe the essence of evil is to exercise power over and take control from others to meet one's own purposes, regardless of the hurt it brings to others. In my mind I was different than the men who physically abuse people they love and men who sexually abuse children and rape women. Yet, as I thought about my relationships, I questioned my own role with power and control. Could I

Peggy Frutiger Hanson currently trains and participates in the marathon of being a full-time mother. After fifteen years as a social worker and part-time political activist, she returned for a graduate degree in psychology. She says, "freelance writing helps to synthesize my work and gives me a place to be a professional outside of motherhood. Motherhood fulfills my need for political action."

honestly say I don't attempt to manipulate or impose my own will on others? Perhaps therein lies the dark side of us all.

I came to this conclusion after a long sabbatical from my career in social work to stay home and raise three small boys to become gentle, loving men. In social work I was exposed to a political philosophy which helped me understand systems of equality, privilege, and oppression. Using power to get one's own way does not have to be expressed through rape or physical abuse to be evil. Interactions between a parent and child can involve a misuse of power. It takes maturity to be bigger, stronger, more educated and experienced than a child yet truly treat a child as an equal.

In the Christian tradition we are called to be in community with one another. This means we must be socially embedded in such a way that we receive feedback about who we are as people. Often this reflection enhances our self-esteem. Sometimes it illuminates a correction we need to make in our personality or our character.

Nowhere have I found a better mirror than my family. Recently, our seven-year-old boy bumped into people when he bounced, skipped, and hopped from a restaurant to our car. I asked him to walk next to me three times before I snatched him by the arm and escorted him through the parking lot. On the drive home, I noticed he was mad at me. I asked him what was wrong, "I don't think it is right to hurt me in order to get what you want!" he said. My son understood how I had used power. I saw it myself though his eyes. In that instant, I became a better person and a better parent.

The educator's task in my role as mother gives me the opportunity to see firsthand what it is I teach. When I impose my will upon my children, they reflect an

uncooperative, angry stance. When I engage them by appealing to their natural interest in cooperation and their desire to gain competency and independence, I teach them how to become people. Moreover, when they respond to me by withdrawing or rebelling, they teach me. By their feedback, I discover the limits of personal power and when to let go of control. I discover that being a parent does not give me the right to have my own way. To distinguish between my role as teacher and my desire for control challenges me. This seems like such a simple lesson yet it illustrates a difficult charge in life: to possess personal power without using it to get your own way in a relationship. Motherhood becomes an ultimate challenge in learning how to teach respect and equality for all people.

As career choices go, motherhood wins the award for the most difficult job. The tasks which accompany the role demand and challenge even the most efficient person. Decisions facing mothers cast shadows of doubt on otherwise competent and confident leaders.

Contrary to expectations given the workload, motherhood presumes a relationship rather than a list of tasks. I don't "parent my children" any more than I "wife" my husband. Motherhood retains certain intimacies, expectations, and social privileges. Mothers carry specific responsibilities indeed. The essence of motherhood, however, lies in the quality of the relationship between two people, mother and child.

My children are young. It will be many years before I see how loving and gentle they are as men. Occasionally, I possess the privilege to glimpse who they are becoming. An elderly woman in our family, who struggles with serious intellectual and emotional challenges, gave me

such a glimpse. She embraces us with her love and warmth. Sometimes, due to her disabilities, she exhibits unpleasant personal habits. On her birthday, the children and I visited her and took her out to eat. As we left, she walked toward me with arms outstretched, extended a hug, and kissed me goodbye. She then turned to my children. Despite her drool, my seven-year-old son allowed her to kiss him on the lips rather than hurt her feelings by turning away. When we discussed it later, he wrinkled his nose and cried, "Mom, it was wet!" He struggled, yet was kind. His generosity touched me. He reflected values which he learned through our better interactions. It reminded me that motherhood provides many opportunities for spiritual and political action.

Robert F. Campbell

Minyan & Praying

Rehel Goldberg Bader

As a student of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, it was natural for me to explore a dream which directed me to deeper levels of prayer. (Kabbalah is a compilation of many works which seek to make manifest the hidden aspect of Torah—the five books of Moses.) In my exploration of the dream, I wrote the short story called "Praying" which appears following this introduction. In the story I use concepts central to Kabbalah: "repairing the world" and the holiness of the Hebrew alphabet. Both are ways we, in the Jewish mystical tradition, create sacred space and complete a healing.

The Meaning of the Minyan

In the story a healing takes place because of two Jewish traditions—the Minyan and the Kaddish. The Minyan is a daily synagogue prayer group that must have a minimum of ten adults present. In our Conservative synagogue, the Minyan meets Monday, Thursday, and Saturday morning to pray, read the Torah, and enable

Rehel Goldberg Bader retired from social work and now writes poetry and short stories. She is a student of dreams, art, and the Kabbalah. She lives in Florida.

mourners to say the Kaddish, a traditional prayer for mourning. For Jews in mourning there is an obligation to say the Kaddish over a specific length of time, depending on who has died. For instance, when a parent dies, a grown child is to say Kaddish for eleven months, but Kaddish is a public prayer. It is not said alone.

While I was rewriting my short story, "Praying," a close friend suddenly and unexpectedly died. In helping his family and mine cope with grief, both the dream and the story assumed greater relevance.

The idea of healing both the dead and the living through prayer came to me while writing this story. The story became a message for me. I wanted to be part of creating a healing space. The Minyan provides that space and becomes a place where one can confront grief, find support, and begin the healing process. After my friend's death I felt that, in spite of the early hour and the long drive to the synagogue, I wanted to be counted among the ten individuals necessary to assure the Minyan.

The Minyan proved to be a gift. Through this one hour, whether I was called up to the Torah to pray or if I took part in any of the devotional blessings, just by being there, I had been healed, embraced by holiness, and gathered up in awe.

Praying: A Short Story

We stood, the three of us, facing the Eastern Wall of the old house and prayed. Religious artifacts were strewn about the room. Jonathan, recognizing what had taken place, covered his head with his prayer shawl and began releasing lost souls immediately. We, Michael and I, joined him. Not a single word passed between us.

We prayed a standard prayer, something we do three times a day. I bound myself, head and hands, into the prayer's light, held the inner flame of the prayer, and then, meditated on the letters of each word.

Jonathan, Michael, and I had been doing a back roads exploration of Europe when we found the abandoned house. The house held echoes of World War II. I resisted entering the place, but Jonathan prevailed. Praying in places of tragedy is Jonathan's avocation—he calls it "world healing." I was tired and wanted to return to the hotel and could not see the urgency of making one more stop in a long forgotten place. I, personally, was ready for some present day sightseeing and a little fun. Jonathan would have none of it. He reminded us that we had a responsibility to investigate this place that appeared on our path.

As we prayed, a lamp suddenly materialized. Jonathan and Michael circled it at a distance as if it were explosive. I played with the turn key of what looked like a nineteenth century oil lamp.

The lamp lit. Smoke covered the room like a thick vapor. It was then that I heard the chanting that seemed to come from nowhere. It filled the room. Seven forms emerged as the vapor burnt off. The forms, wrapped in traditional prayer shawls, bobbed and weaved while facing the Eastern Wall. They ignored us completely.

In the center of the lamp, within the light, was a silver pointer. As I moved my hand toward the pointer, it drew a bible on the glass. The bible became three dimensional and rested on the lamp base.

The bible opened and the pointer began writing messages in Hebrew letters. I felt like I was personally being written in and included in Genesis. Each time I picked up my hand a new message began. Jonathan and Michael laughed nervously. Michael whispered, "Dreamland, we are in dreamland. Wide awake and in dreamland."

I could feel the calling. An urgency filled us and the energy grew fuller and deeper with each message. I was trying to find the correct prayer level, but felt we were dancing through veils.

Counting the apparitions, there were now ten of us, an essential congregational community to say the Kaddish—the prayer for the dead. It now was easy to see why we had been sent to the old house. Jonathan and Michael, with me following, joined in the prayers. We followed the chant easily for we said the same prayers each morning.

When the prayers were completed, the seven apparitions disappeared, as suddenly as they had appeared. It was as if they had never been there, yet the house was different. Something holy, once interrupted, had been righted.

Now we knew we had a specific purpose in the scheme of things but still, miracle that this was, beyond being beckoned to prayer, we know no more.

The Mourner's Kaddish

May the great Name of God be exalted and sanctified, throughout the world, which he has created according to his will. May his Kingship be established in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the entire household of Israel, swiftly and in the near future; and say, Amen. May his great name be blessed, forever and ever. Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, honored, elevated and lauded be the Name of the holy one, Blessed is he above and beyond any blessings and hymns, praises and consolations which are uttered in the world; and say Amen. May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life, upon us and upon all Israel; and say, Amen. He who makes peace in his high holy places, may he bring peace upon us, and upon all Israel; and say Amen.

PRAYERS

A Blessing of Solitude

May you recognize in your life the presence, power, and light of your soul.
May you recognize that you are never alone, that your soul in its brightness
and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.
May you have respect for your own individuality and difference.
May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique, that you have a special destiny here,
that behind the facade of your life there is something beautiful, good, and eternal happening.
May you learn to see yourself with the same delight, pride, and expectation with which God sees you in every moment.

~Andrew M. Greeley, *Irish Mist*

These prayers were submitted by Ida Donna Devlin, a frequent contributor to Sacred Journey.

God

God is the Question with whom we contend throughout
our lives.
God is the One standing there
in the closing of doors and the opening of windows.
God is the Surprising Voice that calls
in the jaggedness of life.
God is the Hand that keeps the world
from snuffing out the stars.
God is the Poem that begins and ends in a circle.
God is the Circle that neither begins nor ends.

~ Ann Weems, *Searching for Shalom*

Night Prayer

Dear God,
Thank you for all that is good.
For your creation and our humanity.
For the stewardship you have given us of this planet earth,
For the gifts of life and of one another, for your love which is unbounded and eternal.

O thou, most holy and beloved, my Companion, my Guide upon the way, my bright evening star.

~ From the New Zealand Prayer Book

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I Am

I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,
I am the wave of the ocean,
I am the murmur of the billows,
I am the ox of the seven combats,
I am the vulture upon the rocks,
I am a beam of the sun,
I am the fairest of plants,
I am the wild boar in valor,
I am the salmon in the water,
I am a lake in the plain,
I am a word of knowledge,
I am the point of the lance in battle,
I am the God who created fire in the head.

~ Amergin, circa 500 B.C.E.

Navajo Chant

May it be delightful my house,
From my head may it be delightful,
To my feet may it be delightful,
Where I lie may it be delightful,
All above me may it be delightful,
All around me may it be delightful.

In the Attic

Jeff McCord

I have prayed to God. I have longed for a response. And I have prayed some more. It's interaction I seek. More than rote monologue, I want active prayer, a two-way communication. . . a conversation. If there is a scorecard for conversation, the one who listens most will surely be judged the winner. But my actions have been at odds with this knowledge. On and on I've prayed, talking about this and that—what I hoped for, what I appreciated, what I didn't understand. It's been difficult for God to get a word in edgewise. Certainly in my conversation, I've lost by not listening. For if I lend an ear, God will tell me of the answer I truly seek—the one I talk around, the one that eludes even my heart and is known only to my soul. God will tell me if I can only learn to listen. But how? How can I listen? How can I have that kind of conversation? The answer is in the attic.

Jeff McCord is a systems analyst who writes at night after he tucks his three children into bed. He is a graduate of Education for Ministry, a four-year religion studies program administered by Sewanee School of Theology. He lives in Kingsport, TN with his wife and children.

It is in the morning. The house sleeps. My wife is already about her predawn walk, and I rise from an empty bed. Another weekday awaits with all its promise of bluster and busyness. But first a shower, quick and hot, and then neatly robed in last-night's pajamas, I ascend the attic stairs with clean bare feet.

The change in temperature is subtle this morning. It must be a mild day. Usually, there is a great difference between the feel of outside and in. The attic knows of this difference, but takes no side. Both thermometers are allowed a presence. Neither is granted sole custody. Situated above the cloistered rooms and below the open sky, extremes find a meeting place among old furniture and unpacked boxes. It seems the right place for conversation.

I climb the stairs to voice my heart.

My knee is stiff with early morning, something that even the shower has lost the ability to ease. So I am glad to find my overstuffed chair. To its side sits a table upon which my Bible, a sports watch, and sorely used candle rest. I have recently taken to lighting a candle. And after the flame gains momentum, I set the alarm on my watch and turn to my Bible.

Today it is Job. There is no particular reason for choosing this passage. Sometimes I follow a sequence of scripture. And sometimes I begin where the book decides to open. But I always read aloud, and today it is Job. "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. . . ." I speak the scripture softly bathing my ears in the melody and meaning. I like the sound of my Bible, so it is with some reluctance that I finish the forty-second chapter and return it to the table. I am vaguely aware that the clock still ticks and the alarm

waits anxiously to be heard. So I move along, and bow my head to pray.

I speak the prayer. It is one of my own tradition. As a boy, I was taught to give praise, to give thanks, and to ask blessings for myself and others. It is a good prayer. Out loud and honest, I speak my piece . . . certain that I am heard . . . believing that among the similar petitions the Lord knows mine as unique. At the end, I ask forgiveness. It seems more necessary than when I was a boy. An urgency has crept into acknowledging my separation. Perhaps it is a function of age. No matter, for with a "Amen" I have finished speaking. I have pronounced the Word. I have voiced my heart. It is time for me to listen.

It is a brazen attempt, this approaching God.

It is fair to say that I was not open to "centering" prayer. Quite possibly it was because I never knew that such a thing existed. But when it was introduced to me, my skepticism blossomed. But the bloom was short-lived. For with my first experience, I knew that there was something there. I was not certain whether this "something" was of heaven or hell. But there was something . . . a healing serenity . . . a promise of peace. . . an inviting idol . . . a subtle evil. So I began to read.

Father Thomas Keating dispelled my notion that contemplation was a uniquely Eastern precept. And *The Cloud of Unknowing* woke my heart to the joyful simplicity of mysticism. And as the list of authors grew, so did my comfort that this kind of prayer was not "unchristian." So I practiced. Along the way I have found the serenity and the peace. But I have also fallen victim to the idol and trod upon the unexpected agony of what mystics call

"the dark night of the soul." But now, in the attic, I can listen. At times my ear is attuned. At times I am simply deaf. And there are times when I cannot tell what I am. But I have found a way to start listening. And I am certain it was shown to me by God.

Deep breaths and a single word invite quiet. Today the word is "peace." There is nothing special about the word. In fact, it is necessarily ordinary. The word is just a focal point, a place for the mind to rally when relinquishing its reign. When I exhale, I roll the word through my consciousness, chasing away the other words that fight to be considered. I have long practice at expelling these rebellious thoughts. But there are times, many times, when they win nonetheless and the deep listening quiet avoids me. But this morning it is blessed, and the whole of existence becomes a single word.

There is a point, a mystical point, when even the single word is lost. There is little I can do to describe it. It is not fair to language to stretch it that far. But I know, it is now that I hear most clearly. I know that I have abandoned the limits of my own comprehension and opened my soul to God. It is a brazen attempt, this approaching God, this daring to listen. And it frightens me. But it is what I am to do. It is how I am to know. And it fills me with such a joyous peace that I ascend the attic stairs again and again.

It has not always been the attic. I have listened in other rooms in other homes. But it is the attic now. And I confess, it is my favorite.

The alarm lifts its soft incessant beep. How much time has it been? An hour? An eternity? There is need for the alarm. I open my eyes and find comfort in the castaway old toys, mismatched dishware, my old work boots. Just precious enough to escape the garbage heap, I find an

odd kinship with these things.

The house has awakened. Muted voices find their way through the ceiling. The rush of running water vibrates within the pipes. The children are up and my wife, no doubt, is back from her walk. I listen to these sounds. In peace and thanksgiving, I soak them into my heart. I could stay longer. But the alarm is now a silent sentry. And who knows how long I could stay. So I shake from my serenity and stand from my chair.

I suspect I am a poor listener. I wager that I have missed most of what has been told to me. But I have heard some. And I know that reality is much grander than I had ever imagined. I understand that creation boasts more mystery than a microscope will ever observe. I realize that the classifications of "material" and "spiritual" are human constructs. The mystical knows no such bounds. God is free to color outside the lines. I did not know this before. My one-sided conversation befuddled epiphany.

I descend the stairs upon another weekday. And it is now that I know quite clearly that the bluster and the busyness will be riddled with divinity. God does not confine our dialogue to a single room. But as the day progresses and the little things begin to mount, I will forget. Some days I will forget altogether. But come morning, after a shower, there will be another conversation in the attic.

A TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCE

Walking to the Gates of Heaven

Kathryn A. Beres

In the late afternoon, I sat comfortably nestled in a chair, reading aloud to my two young daughters. How serene it felt to just be still. The prior week my fifty-six-year-old mom had moved into a local nursing home. The search for a care facility had been physically draining and emotional devastating. During the search, my mom temporarily lived with my family. I was three months pregnant, had two young children, and I struggled to provide the care my mom needed.

I had faithfully visited my mom every day since she had moved to the nursing home, but on this day I was without a vehicle. I felt missing one visit was okay.

My feeling of tranquility and stillness was abruptly interrupted by a phone call from the nursing home. My mom had slipped into an unexpected coma.

Kathryn Beres is a stay-at-home mom residing in rural Wisconsin with her husband and four active children. Her work, which reflects true-life experiences, has appeared in many Christian publications including Focus on the Family.

In a state of shock and disbelief, I made some quick arrangements for the care of my daughters and for transportation to the nursing home. I called my only sibling, Jeff, who lived several states away, and headed off to meet my dad at the nursing home.

When I arrived, I was disheartened. For the first and hopefully the last time, I witnessed someone near to me in a comatose state. My mother lay in her bed, still as the night. Her beautiful brown eyes were opened yet glazed over. Though her body appeared motionless, occasionally a sliver of a tear would slowly trickle down the side of her pale cheek.

Saddened by the reality of the moment, which at that point I was not completely accepting, I was unsure of what to do or say.

My father and I began a one-sided conversation with my speechless mom. We talked about all the things we were going to do together as a family, once she pulled through this. How unsettled my mom must've felt as she listened to our words while fighting for each breath.

After some time, my dad, who wasn't coping well with the situation, decided to go home. I felt so torn. Should I leave to comfort my dad? Should I stay at my mom's side as she completed what I hoped were not her final moments? My mom seemed distant and I felt so alone.

I stayed. Though my brother, Jeff, physically couldn't be there with us, he phoned throughout the night. It was almost as if he were by my side. It seemed that each time he called, a spiritual power must have enticed him. He called just when his support was needed the most.

One specific time, I had just been asked by the nurse, "If your mother should go into cardiac arrest, should we revive her?" While my heart was screaming, "Yes!" I really struggled with my answer.

struggled with my answer.

Just then, my brother called. God must've prompted him. I needed to hear his voice and sense his support and have his help to answer such an enormous question. Though we were thousands of miles away, his comforting words coiled around me, offering me courage and strength. I no longer felt all alone. We both knew that our mom's wishes would be to let God take her naturally, but it was still a huge struggle to write my signature when I was asked to authorize our final decision. As we ended that phone conversation, we both knew in our hearts that the final stage of our mom's life was approaching. It was much too soon. The time was extremely difficult, but as I reflect now, I am truly grateful that I was given the opportunity to say goodbye.

By now my husband had arrived after comforting our daughters at home. As we entered my mom's room, I was once again at a loss for words. This moment stripped away my denial. Here was My Mom–My Best Friend, and she was dying. As I held her hand and prayed, suddenly I realized that she was hanging on to what little life she had now for us. We needed to let go. She accomplished her dignified motherly role by holding on to the dwindling fragments of her vanishing life until we were ready to say goodbye. It was now my turn to be brave and strong. It was time for me to give to her in return.

I respectfully expressed to her how special she was to all of us and that we would always love and cherish our extraordinary memories together. I explained to her that though she would be greatly missed, we would all be okay.

As I tightly held her hand, I envisioned myself walking her to the gates of heaven. Her breathing became very shallow, very faint, and slowed down until it drifted away.

I was finally letting go . . . and so was she.

ILLUMINATIONS

Prayer is the outcome of love, it is a form of love, it is therefore creative since love is the very life of God himself. The nearer anyone draws to God, the nearer he draws to all that God loves, that is, to the whole world and every single person in it.

~Thekla

When we sit down for half an hour—without talking to someone, listening to music, watching television, or reading a book—and try to become very still, we often find ourselves so overwhelmed by our noisy inner voices that we can hardly wait to get busy and distracted again. Our inner life often looks like a banana tree full of jumping monkeys! But when we decide not to run away and stay focused, these monkeys may gradually go away because of lack of attention, and the soft gentle voice calling us beloved may gradually make itself heard.

~Henri Nouwen, *Now and Then*

To me God is the One who manifests as all things in time and space. God is not something you pray to, but rather the greater reality to which you awake.

~Rabbi Rami Shapiro

So (remembering the definition of the word "suffer") until we bow down and bear the suffering of life—not opposing it, but *absorbing* it and *being* it—we cannot see what our life is. This by no means implies passivity or nonaction, but action from a state of complete acceptance. Even "acceptance" is not quite accurate—it's simply *being* the suffering. It isn't a matter of protecting ourselves, or accepting something else. Complete openness, complete vulnerability to life, is (surprisingly enough) the only satisfactory way of living our life.

~Charlotte Joko Beck, *Everyday Zen*

Each person, no matter how old, has an important work to do . . . This good work not only accomplishes something needed in the world, but completes something in us. When it is finished a new work emerges that will help us make green a desert place, as well as to scale another mountain in ourselves. The work we do in the world, when it is true vocation, always corresponds in some mysterious way to the work that goes on within us.

~Elizabeth O'Connor,
Cry Pain, Cry Hope

The Bible tells us to love our neighbors and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people.

~G.K. Chesterton

God wants nothing from you but the gift of a peaceful heart.

~Meister Eckhart

Praying Readiness

Mary E. Penrose

The term "reading readiness" is used to evaluate students for the educational venture. In a venture so important as our spiritual growth, we might ask if there is anything we can do to prepare ourselves for the serious endeavor we call prayer. Is there such a thing as "praying readiness"? To help answer this question, I have reflected on my own God-experiences and have found it useful to ask, *What things attune me to God?*

I remember as a youngster of about eight or nine, riding my bicycle to our quaint Norwegian chapel on a hill after dark to be sure no one would see me. At that time, our town was plagued with deep prejudice both among Catholics and Protestants. Also, going to church on weekdays was unheard of unless you were super pious or a little odd. Church attendance was limited to Sundays, to weddings, to funerals and to days assigned for church cleaning.

Mary Penrose, O.S.B, was the editor of Spirit and Life *for many years and is the author of* Roots Deep and Strong: Great Men and Women of the Church. *She lives in Duluth, MN.*

Allowing human respect to get the better of me, I would hide my bike in some bushes behind the building for fear this tomboy might be thought too pious. Going in, I would kneel down in the darkness of the church.

I went to a pew about halfway up the aisle. Before settling down to pray, I observed the mysterious flickering of lights and shadows caused by the sanctuary lamp playing on the walls. My eyes would then move to the statue of Our Lady where the vigil lights cast light on her slim figure and her upraised, folded hands. The first uneasiness I had felt about going to church "for no reason" was replaced with a feeling of peace. I was glad I had come. At these times I experienced being very close to God and to Mary and became dimly aware that they were inviting me to a closer communion with them. I received more than I expected, for this small act of courage became a foreshadowing of future encounters.

Later, in high school, my best friend and I used to talk to each other on the phone around supper time each evening. This despite the fact that we were inseparable and had talked all day in school. Naturally, since we were on a party line, we did not win points for being the favorite teenagers in the neighborhood! Afterwards, we would meet at her house and then bike to a nearby state park before returning to town to our local drive-in for potato chips and a coke. This after school ritual never varied and was never omitted except for very serious reasons. To both of us, it signified joy and friendship.

One night as we approached the drive-in, we had to wait at an intersection before crossing the main highway. As we waited, a car drove up next to us and I was surprised to see our parish priest at the wheel. He smiled, leaned over and asked, "What are you doing, Mary?" It

was an innocent enough question. The answer seemed so obvious I was tempted to retort impudently, *What does it look like I am doing?* Instead, I returned the smile, giggled nervously and replied, "Biking." The brief encounter ended and we were free to cross the highway. The question, however, had imbedded itself in my subconscious and began to assume great meaning for me. It became a life-question: *Yes, what are you doing Mary? Are you going to spend the rest of your life doing this potato chip and coke routine?* The question became a part of a tapestry which eventually led to my vocational desire to become a Sister.

These occurrences in my life's journey, on the surface very ordinary, seemed uncanny to me. At times I chided myself for reading too much into them. There were other times when I boldly challenged God to prove these "connections" were not caused by my imagination playing tricks on me but were truly divine messages. For example, when my desire to choose a religious vocation was still hazy, I decided to make a fifty-four day novena to Our Lady, which, at that time, was very popular. The novena involved saying the rosary each day in sections divided into three groups of nine days in petition followed by the same number of days in thanksgiving. I was happy to notice a definite "sign" happening each ninth day of petition.

At the end of the first nine days I made a tentative decision. Up to then I had just been thinking about entering the convent. Deciding required some kind of action. Since I was not sure of myself, I determined to ask our parish priest for advice. The day he scheduled for our appointment was the last day of the second series of nine days. He concurred with my plans and suggested that I consult the Prioress of the community I was thinking of

joining to find out what the next step might be. You guessed it, my next appointment was on the last day of the third ninth day of petition! Since I had nothing to do with these schedules, I was positive a divine intervention had taken place. Naturally, I prayed the days of thanksgiving with special fervor and enthusiasm. I had become convinced that entering the convent was God's will for me.

Today, when requesting things from God I am less simplistic and superstitious. Now, instead of looking for signs or asking for interventions so that things go my way, I find in myself a great desire to be led by God, no matter where those leadings might take me. Basically, I approach prayer with the conviction that the One who loves me can be trusted and intends only my best good. This in turn, leads me to a firm belief that the messages indicated to me through these gentle urges are right.

I find in myself a great desire to be led by God

Consequently, I pray for strong attachment to God's will, whatever that might be. I might discover this will through major societal events, in the people I encounter each day, or even in mundane occurrences. For example, ecological issues call me to be concerned about God's earth and to act accordingly; a refreshing swim reminds me of the Source of all energy, strengthening me for the day's work; observing a disabled person arouses in me greater compassion and a desire to help if possible and so on.

Though there has been a shift in my prayer over the years, there is a continuity in the God-experiences of the past and those of the present. Today, though I no longer presume to look for "signs," I still find small, unexpected

hints that God is right around the corner of my life's journey. Some might call these hints serendipitous; I'm inclined to call them providential. Whatever the label, these experiences, past and present, have revealed God's activity in my life. At both stages, the key to any praying readiness I have had has been awareness. Cultivating awareness that divine activity is taking place in my life heightens my desire for God and it clearly attunes me to the necessary next step as well. Of crucial importance in the process of discerning God's will in my life has been my own willingness to take the risk of the next step.

BOOKS WE'VE ENJOYED

Grace Notes by Lorraine V. Murray. Foreword by Rebecca Laird. Hardcover, Resurrection Press, 2002. Reviewed by Maryann Hannan.

Grace Notes is a lovely book, and a loving one. More to the point, it spoke to me as clearly as if its author were sitting across my kitchen table, sharing her life in all its wryness and poignancy. She is not a perfect person, far from it, as she admits with great candor, but she is trying, in the words of Christ, to pick up her cross and follow him.

Murray is a columnist in the "Faith and Values" section of the ***Atlanta Journal-Constitution*** and a frequent contributor to the Catholic Jesuit weekly magazine, ***America***. Many of the short essays gathered here appeared previously in these publications, but they profit from being gathered in one collection. Bit by bit, her story unfolds, not chronologically, but loosely ordered according to topics such as Believing, Suffering, Serving, Grace, Loving. All the biggies, in other words.

The challenges Murray has faced go to the heart of the feminine: the painful loss of her mother from breast cancer, a joint decision with her husband to remain childless, a youthful abortion with its guilty aftershocks, and most recently, her own battle with breast cancer.

Maryann Hannan is a poet living in upstate New York.

Inevitably, these experiences force her to confront the mystery of human suffering. She finds her answer in the paradox of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

After a period of what she calls atheism in young adulthood, Murray returned, with a healthy dose of skepticism, to the faith of her youth, Catholicism. Finding an unsuspected richness in renewed faith and experiencing moments of incredible grace, she and her husband made lifestyle changes in order to live more in line with their beliefs. They simplified their material needs, changed their high paced careers, volunteered more, loved more, prayed harder. They learned their lessons well.

Then in May 2000 she got the diagnosis that any woman, let alone the daughter of a breast cancer victim, most fears, and all her beliefs and serenity are once again put to the test. "Do I fully trust God?" she asks, answering "I would be lying if I told you I did. But I am working on it . . . and enjoying the ride."

Grace Notes is an impressive mix of personal revelation and spiritual wisdom, thoroughly grounded in deep Scriptural reflection. We would all do well to follow Murray's advice and "Laugh when things are funny. Cry when things are sad. And, above all, trust that someone much bigger than you has everything under control." Her book made me laugh and cry, all the while charting the perils and the ultimate peace of turning to God in every moment of our lives.

Seminary Sunset

Wendi Robbins

Exhaling *God!* as I came upon it
on the steps (later noting the irony),
on that plaform to fire, finality
burning in a ball over the bay,
taking its leave like a prophet—
last flourish of red and orange
streaming behind shading
the backs of the couple holding hands,
the jogger and her dog, the rabbi
in black hat and coat, the few
stragglers like myself silenced mid-
sentence, frozen like the last
frame of a film
on an interfaith consortium,
gawking diplomats of a setting
planet, clutching coffees
in the California cold.

Wendi Robbins's poetry has appeared in Beauty for Ashes, Northern Stars Magazine *and* Poetry Motel. *She lives in the bay area of California and is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology.*

Dance

Nancy A. Henry

No one sees me dance at dawn,
twirl in my old socks,
raise my hands like sun
above my hazy head,
slip my shoulders,
sway my hair like willow-branches
sink to my knees adoring
rise up in a sweep of praise. . .
no one sees me dance at dawn
but You.

No one hears me sing at dawn,
whispery invitation
before the first birds call
silver streaks up the sky
simple notes of "yes",
laughter, "always"
never "if only" anymore.
No one hears me sing after darkness
but You.

Nancy A. Henry's poems have appeared in Atlanta Review, Penwood Reivew, St. Anthony Messenger *and other small journals. She is an Assistant Attorney General for the State of Maine in the child protection division handling child abuse cases. She also teaches Bible in her parish.*

I dance my prayer.
I sing my prayer,
fling my prayer to heaven with
glad wings, trample grief and worry
underfoot like plump grapes that yield
a wild wine of joy.

Come my love
our vines have tender grapes
and it is morning, and the birds
begin to wake the earth
and sing away the night,
do you hear them? Dance,
Dance with me,
come,
The night is over.
Dance.

Robert F. Campbell

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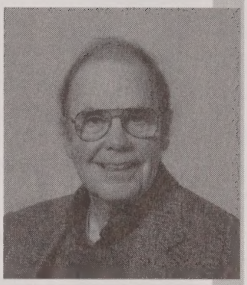

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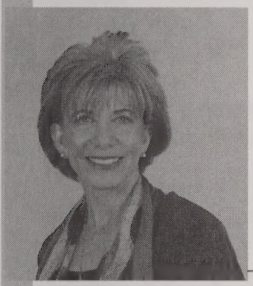

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